



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Introduction to Shared Narratives—A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue

Author(s): Paul Scham, Benjamin Pogrund and As'ad Ghanem

Source: *Israel Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Shared Narratives—A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue / Guest Editors: Paul Scham, Benjamin Pogrund, and As'ad Ghanem (Summer 2013), pp. 1-10

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/israelstudies.18.2.1>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/israelstudies.18.2.1?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Israel Studies*

JSTOR

Paul Scham, Benjamin Pogrund, and As'ad Ghanem

Introduction to Shared Narratives— A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF *SHARED HISTORIES*¹ IN 2005, THE NARRATIVES of the various sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have become both a cottage industry² and a common catchphrase³ used frequently even by negotiators and politicians. However, the concept of narratives as a working tool in the peace process has not yet been taken on board by those involved in resolving the conflict.

The reason is not hard to find, and is touched on in some of the literature.⁴ The study of “Narratives” is considered a squishy, academic activity, far removed from the hard-headed realities of creating enforceable agreements. It implies a post-modernist concept that there are truths beyond “objective realities”. In fact, in this context, it posits that historical truth is less important in peacemaking than what the two societies believe to have happened. This is a counter-intuitive, even bizarre, concept to those, including the vast majority of educated citizens, who believe it is a truism that good, i.e., correct history, by definition, tells you what “really” happened in the past.

Moreover, both parties, including the majority of their populations and most of their leadership, genuinely believe in the truth of their own narrative. This is true of most of those who, concurrently, genuinely believe in the two-state solution (polls indicate this is a majority of both Israelis and Palestinians)⁵ and in coexistence with the other side. In other words, they are sure that their side and their narrative is right and just, but they are willing to make peace because realistic people on both sides have reached the sensible conclusion that neither side is going to leave.

The latter attitude took decades to achieve and, in most conflicts, that would be sufficient to provide the basis for a settlement that would be more or less acceptable to both parties. One of the important questions in this conflict, and a major impetus for the growth of studies of narratives of the conflict, is why it has proved to be insufficient here.

This special issue, like our previous volume, attempts to provide some of the answers to that question. Its methodology is to present written versions of the alternative narratives and then provide a forum where those

who are interested in the conflict, whether or not directly involved, can see the two sides arguing over these issues. This is a slice of reality that is usually invisible to everyone except for the few who actually participate in these dialogues which are freely available at <http://www.israelstudies.umd.edu/sharednarratives.html>

It should be understood from the outset that this cannot be considered to be a “typical” Israeli-Palestinian interaction (if there is such a thing). The participants are professionals, many are academics specializing in these fields, and most are intimately familiar with both the past and present of the conflict. Moreover, they are probably more “moderate” than the “average” Israeli or Palestinian. The fact that all agreed to sit down with the other side and have a civil dialogue illustrates this. Those on both sides who are more nationalist or more militant in general, seldom do this in a non-confidential setting (and rarely enough even behind closed doors).

However, in fundamental ways the participants in this project are indeed representative of their respective societies. All are citizens of Israel, including Palestinian citizens, or of the Palestinian Authority; almost all live there currently, and the large majority were born into the societies (two of the few exceptions to the latter rule are among the authors of this introduction).

Based on the reactions to the previous book, which used the same format, the most useful, even eye-opening, aspect of that volume was providing readers with the opportunity to actually see and thus better understand the clash of ideas between the two societies, but also within each. Anyone who reads the transcripts (which were edited to remove redundancies, make vague points clearer and render non-native speakers of English, which most participants are, more comprehensible to readers) will soon pick up the significant differences in approach within the two sides. This too is part of the conflict.

Given this, can we speak of “two” narratives or is there such a multiplicity as to render the concept useless? We believe, when reduced to their essential elements, that there are only two master narratives. The Palestinian narrative illustrates a people unjustly deprived of its land by invaders. The Israeli narrative demonstrates a justified “return” of those dispossessed many generations before. “All the rest,” as the first century (C.E.) Jewish sage Hillel said, “is commentary.” These are the essential concepts on which the huge edifice of each historical narrative has been erected.

In contrast to the previous book, which was organized chronologically, this special issue takes a thematic approach. This enabled the authors and speakers to examine some of the most basic issues, such as land,

religion, nationalism, and Jerusalem, as they developed, and not only at a particular snapshot in time. This approach corresponds more to the reality of the disputed issues even though all are, to varying degrees, inextricably intertwined.

It also enabled some of the larger conceptual issues to be explored more fully. For example, for many Palestinians, including some who participated in this project, the role of the Jewish religion in Zionism seems paradoxical, or even hypocritical. Many Israeli Jews are non-religious; some proclaim themselves atheists. How, Palestinians ask, can non-religious Jews accept an ideology which is based on a religious book whose origins are not clear? (Religious Jews maintain the Torah was given to Moses by God; secular Jews are still trying to figure out who wrote it.) Is there really a difference, participants ask, between religious and secular Zionists? And even if there is, why should it make a difference to Palestinians, and why should they attempt to understand them?

THE ROLE AND UTILITY OF NARRATIVES IN THE CONFLICT

There are several answers to that question. Perhaps the most basic, applying equally to Palestinians and Israelis, is “Understand your adversary”. In order to understand your adversary’s strategy, or even his next step, you need to know his goals. And the goals are determined by his (or her) understanding of the conflict, not your own.

This point seems obvious, until it is examined in practice. The most salient example is the “Right of Return” that Palestinians claim, the narrative of which has been examined at some length by one of the present authors.⁶ It is discussed here simply to illustrate this point.

Most Israelis, when asked why the Palestinians want the Right of Return, will probably give an answer that boils down to “to destroy Israel”. This is a fundamental part of the Israeli narrative; that the chief goal of Palestinians and Arabs in general is to destroy the Jewish State. This helps explain the suspicion with which many Israelis regard peace overtures such as the Arab Peace Initiative first proposed by the Arab League in 2002 and reaffirmed in 2007. If the fundamental goal of the Arabs is truly to destroy Israel, any “peace plan” they propose must be a step along the road to that goal, and should be treated as such.

On the other side of the fence, if Palestinians or many other Arabs are asked the same question, the first response will probably be “to return to our

land”. However, one of the responses of many of them is sure to be some variant of “to restore our dignity” or “honor”. For many Arabs the humiliation of 1948 and 1967 has to do largely with putting to rest the specter that haunts them, that they lost everything, and that no one seems to care, least of all Israel, which officially denies they were expelled.

Many Israelis, were they to engage in this discussion, would dismiss it as a distinction without a difference. They would be wrong. There are ways that former Palestinian property owners or their descendants can be compensated IF humiliation is redressed, without Israel being destroyed. On the other hand, if it is true that Palestinians would be satisfied only by the destruction of Israel, there is nothing that Israelis can do to bring about peace without committing national suicide. That is relevant for policy makers and everyone else.

The refugee issue is crucial. Palestinians absolutely insist that dealing explicitly with its causes must be a part of any peace settlement. That means confronting the *Nakba*, the “catastrophe”, which is the universal Arabic term for all the events resulting in and from the simultaneous creation of the State of Israel and the Palestinian refugee problem. In these essays and discussions, many Palestinians insist that the *Nakba* is still going on. This is not so much because of current oppression, though that is certainly a factor, so much as they feel the issues of 1948 must be discussed if they are to be settled. And the primary issue, for Palestinians, is the refugee issue.

When this issue is seriously brought up in negotiations and a mutually acceptable statement of shared responsibility for the events of 1948 is issued by the respective Palestinian and Israeli governments, the healing process, a real process of moving forward, can begin. We are under no illusions that this is something that will happen in the near future.

By now, most Israeli historians, whether politically left, right, or center, accept that many Palestinians were indeed expelled, contrary to the Israeli narrative. This is a perfect, and tragic, illustration of the gap between history and narrative

EDUCATION

Devoutly as we may wish that consideration of historical narratives will become a functional part of the peace process, we are much more sanguine with regard to their use as an educational tool, a status that the previous *Shared Histories* volume has already achieved. Studying and attempting to understand the point of view of the “other” is one of the few ways, absent

the opportunity for face-to-face discussion and open debate, that the two sides possess which can enable them to understand the motives and goals of the “other”. It has been a sad irony for years that, as a result of security and political restrictions, one of the most difficult places in the world for Jews and Arabs to meet face-to-face is in Israel/Palestine.

Reports by numerous professors who have used *Shared Histories* in their classes indicate that it provides a unique view of how the opposing ideas in the conflict clash, but also how understanding can be sought and occasionally achieved. Political scientists, sociologists, historians and anthropologists have used the book to provide insights that more conventional books in all these disciplines do not achieve. Facing the “other” in a civilized discussion between equals can create a degree of un-hyperbolic candor that contrasts both with the dispassionate language of textbooks and documents, and with the angry polemics that are so common on the internet nowadays.

Others who use *Shared Histories* and, we hope, who will also adopt *Shared Narratives*, are the many dialogue groups in which Jews meet regularly with Arabs and Muslims. The questions and, sometimes, answers contained in these papers and in the dialogues among experts are ideal for stimulating wider dialogue and discussion.

Of course, *Shared Histories*, despite its name, is not a textbook for history or for any other single discipline. Nor is *Shared Narratives*. The issues and facts that are raised in both books are salient, but not necessarily comprehensive. Many others are skipped entirely. But the vitality of the dialogues vividly illustrates the living and ineradicable importance of the past in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This view runs absolutely contrary to one strand of conventional wisdom which holds that, in order to have fruitful discussions or negotiations, it is necessary to eliminate “history” from dialogues between the two sides. We believe that this approach may start a dialogue, but cannot end one. Both sides are living their past experiences on a daily basis and, in order to comprehend that reality, something of the past of the other must be understood, in the terms that the “other” understands it.

A Palestinian participant in one of the dialogues in this special issue asserted that he is a radical when it comes to the past and a moderate for the present and future. This statement seems to make no sense in most contexts, even in most conflicts. However, what we took him to mean was that, for him, it was essential that the suffering of the Palestinians in and since 1948 must be understood, or at least acknowledged, by Israelis in order for him to move on. But he also made clear that his vision of the future does not

include trying to erase or remake the past, as more conventionally radical Palestinians seek to do by vowing the destruction of Israel or demanding the actual return of millions of their compatriots. He was expressing in stark terms the widespread Palestinian feeling, and not only among intellectuals, that only by Israelis recognizing and taking responsibility for the past would he, and his people, be able to live peacefully and permanently side by side with Israel, accepting the fact that Israel will continue to exist on land Palestinians will still maintain was stolen from them.

THE PARADOX OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The goal of studying and understanding the narratives of both sides is neither to be convinced by the other nor to attempt to create a future in which narratives converge. So long as there is a group that defines itself as Palestinian, its members will probably never forget that Israel is built on land that their ancestors once owned and worked, and that most of which was taken from them by force. Israelis, and Jews in general, likewise will not cease to maintain their claims of cultural, religious, historical, and biological connection to the ancient Israelites. Neither side will accept the other's version of the past. But it is not too much to hope that they will acknowledge it, and that is what we seek to foster.

“Acknowledgement” in this context means respecting the other's belief, even if it logically impinges on your own. In much of the West, at least in liberal circles, this is the norm in the realm of religion. Many believers do not find it necessary to stretch their theological differences with other religions to the logical extreme of being incensed by the logical truism that if another religion is “true”, then your own is “false” or, conversely, that if your religion is “true”, then all others are “false”.

Wars have been fought for centuries over this issue but, these days, many western Jews, Christians, and Muslims would not dream of being offended by their neighbors' beliefs, even though they logically negate their own.

This sort of tolerance rarely carries over to the political realm. Many Israelis are incensed by Palestinians even referring to the *Nakba*, to the extent that a bill was introduced in the Knesset, with considerable popular support, that authorizes withdrawal of state funding from any academic or other institution or organization that commemorates “Nakba Day”, an annual day of mourning for many Israeli Arabs.⁷ Many Arabs and Muslims are openly contemptuous of Jewish claims to have a historically verifiable,

strong, unbreakable connection with the Land of Israel/Palestine over millennia; some Jews are derisive about Muslim historical claims to Jerusalem as a holy site. Large majorities on both sides assume that the other must change its beliefs in order to live peacefully with them.

It is in dealing with antagonisms like these that education in the historical narrative of the other can really bear fruit—when there is an understanding that different, even incompatible, ideas about the past do not necessarily lead to bloodshed or warfare in the present or future. On the contrary, acknowledgement of the past can serve directly as a very strong inducement towards moderation in the present and future.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES TODAY

It is obvious that the ideas developed above are not held by most Israelis, or even by most Israeli intellectuals. Since 1948, Israel has sought to stamp out Palestinian historical consciousness, seeing it as a direct and palpable threat to Israel's actual existence, not only to Zionism's intellectual foundations. Examples are mentioned in various places in this special issue. These include preventing nationalist interpretations of Palestinian history from being taught to Israeli-Arab children; ; Prime Minister Golda Meir's remark that "There were no such thing (sic) as Palestinians";⁸ a pervasive belief that acknowledgement of expulsions or other atrocities by Israeli forces in the 1948 War is unpatriotic and dangerous; attempts to prevent any public support for books or films presenting the facts, now accepted by many Israeli historians, regarding Palestinian suffering in the 1948 War;⁹ legislation such as the "Nakba bill" referenced above; and then Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's remark on Israel's Independence Day in 2008 that only when the Palestinians erase the word "Nakba" from their lexicon there will be peace.¹⁰

However, it should be recognized that many of these efforts have gradually moderated, though the trajectory is not always positive. Israel, by signing the Declaration of Principles in 1993, not only recognized the PLO; it also recognized the existence of the Palestinians as a people. Israeli textbooks have, to some degree, begun to take note of Palestinian suffering. And, as noted, the mainstream of the Israeli historical profession has accepted significant aspects of the Palestinian narrative, especially involving the events of 1948 without, of course, accepting the traditional Palestinian conclusion, that Israel is illegitimate and should not exist. It should be equally emphasized that these moderating tendencies have been continuously opposed

by the Israeli rightwing, which sees them as inherently unpatriotic and subversive, and as evidence of a decline in Israelis' moral fiber.

The paradox, of course, is that the more Israel seeks to erase the Palestinian narrative, the greater traction it gains among Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims and, increasingly, among previously uninvolved individuals. This latter fact has a number of causes, not least the role reversal of Israel, the former "David", now identified by many as "Goliath". But Israel's refusal to recognize the psychological commonplace that the best way to deal with a destructive memory, idea or event is to discuss it openly, has only strengthened the Palestinians' awareness of and insistence on their narrative.

Israelis point out, rightly, that Israel has moved on from 1948 in many ways including, even though it is not officially accepted, the historical profession's recognition of elements of the Palestinian narrative. Israelis ask, "Where are the Palestinian revisionist historians?" The answer is simple. Israel's experiment in nationhood has been dramatically successful on the economic, intellectual, educational and technological planes ever since the state was established in 1948. In extreme contrast, the Palestinian people, four to five generations on, is still in many respects stuck where it was in 1948. Even though numerous Palestinians have been personally successful, collectively they do not have a state, they do not have control over their own destiny and, at least within Israel, their national existence and narrative are regarded by many with suspicion and even hostility. This is a theme that runs through this special issue.

It is our contention that only letting the genie out of the bottle, i.e. for Israel to cease opposing expression of the Palestinian narrative and even to acknowledge (though not accept) it, is probably the only way to allow Palestinians to move forward and end their condition of being stuck in the past. Of course, how the Palestinian narrative will develop thereafter is not something that can be predicted. Probably it will fluctuate with generations. It may become increasingly intertwined with Islam, as the Israeli narrative has with religious Judaism. Of course, it is conceivable it could become actively irredentist, as Israelis fear. However, the greater probability is that de-demonizing the Palestinians and their narrative will free themselves from being stuck in the past, and that a new reality will encourage new and positive variations on the narrative.

However, most Israelis cling to the "slippery slope" theory—that if Israel were to allow Palestinians under their control free expression of their narrative, let alone for Israel to acknowledge it, that would only encourage further violence and irredentism. The reasoning is that if Israel were

to extend credence to Palestinian demands it would only serve to inflame them and encourage more extremism.

In fact, Palestinians have demonstrated a remarkable consistency in their demands on Israel. From 1948 to 1988, Palestinians officially maintained their demands for the whole of Palestine, whether through expulsion of the Zionists (in the Palestinian Charter of 1968) or a secular state, which all assumed would soon be predominantly Palestinian. From the 1988 decision by the PLO to accept Israel's permanent existence in its 1948–67 borders with East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital, most Palestinians have not wavered from that position. In 2002 and again in 2007, those demands have been twice reaffirmed by the Arab League Peace Initiative and even Hamas has indicated at various times a possible willingness to accept them.¹¹

The two state solution is, in fact, being incorporated into the larger Palestinian narrative as “the historic compromise”. However, there is no reason to believe Palestinians will relinquish their historic claim to all of Palestine any more than Jews will deny their historical and religious claims to all of the Land of Israel. But there are good reasons to believe that these two narratives can coexist once a mutually acceptable set of compromises is worked out with regard to tangible issues, and without the impossible demand that one side relinquish its deepest beliefs.

Of course, we do not believe that this will be a simple process. Significant minorities on both sides will oppose compromises. Violence might well continue to be part of the process, as it has been for more than a century. Nonetheless we believe that acknowledging the power and durability of both narratives will help to liberate Palestinians and Israelis, as well as Palestinians and Jews in their respective diasporas. We believe that recovering the past is a necessary part of the route to the future.

NOTES

1. Paul Scham, Walid Salem, Benjamin Poggrund, *Shared Histories: A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2006).

2. A partial list includes: Sami Adwan and Dan Bar-On, eds., *Learning the Other's Historical Narrative: Israelis and Palestinians, Parts One and Two* (Beit Jalla, 2003, 2006); Paul Scham, “The Historical Narratives of Israelis and Palestinians and the Peacemaking Process” *Israel Studies Forum* 20.2 (2006); Robert I Rotberg, *Israeli and Palestinian Historical Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix*

(Bloomington, IN, 2006); Ned Lazarus, "Making Peace with the Duel of Narratives," *Dual-Narrative Texts for Teaching the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*; *Israel Studies Forum* 23.1 (2008); Neil Caplan, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Contested Histories* (Bognor Regis, UK, 2009).

3. A Google search (perhaps the best if not only means of determining usage) of "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" with "narratives" turned up 1,700,000 hits (15 December 2012).

4. See Introduction to *Shared Histories* (*ibid*) and Scham, "Historical Narratives."

5. See for example the polls conducted by Prof. Yaakov Shamir for the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Professor Khalil Shikaki of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research since August, 2000. <http://truman.huji.ac.il/polls.asp>; www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls

6. Scham, "Historical Narratives".

7. Jonathan Lis, "Revised 'Nakba Bill' to be submitted despite Knesset legal adviser's objection," *Ha'aretz*, 12 June 2012. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/revised-nakba-bill-to-be-submitted-despite-knesset-legal-adviser-s-objection-1.436999>

8. The original quote continues: "When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? It was either southern Syria before the First World War, and then it was a Palestine including Jordan. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian *people* and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist." *Sunday Times*, 15 June 1969.

9. For example, the actions by a Likud Minister for Communications in the 1990's to prevent the showing of the documentary "Tekumah" on Israeli television because it showed the plight of the Palestinian refugees and showed that Israeli leaders had not always pursued peace. Eric Silver, "Right-wing Fury at Israel's TV History", *The Independent Online*, 13 March 1998, www.independent.co.uk/news/rightwing-fury-at-israels-tv-history-1149896.html.

10. Akiva Eldar and Avi Issacharoff, Abbas to *Ha'aretz*: "We Will Compromise on Refugees", *Ha'aretz*, 14 September 2008.

11. See the discussion in Paul Scham and Osama Abu-Irshaid, "Hamis: Ideological Rigidity and Political Flexibility" (United States Institute of Peace Special Report, 2009) www.usip.org/files/resources/Special%20Report%20224_Hamas.pdf. See also <http://www.haaretz.com/news/meshal-amas-seeks-palestinian-state-based-on-1967-borders-1.275412>. Of course these are interspersed with regular calls for Israel's destruction, e.g. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/hamas-leader-to-gaza-residents-may-you-bring-down-netanyahu-as-you-did-barak.premium-1.483696>.